

VALLEY VOICE

Low-barrier homeless center weeks away from opening

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The Visalia Navigation Center – the city’s first low-barrier homeless shelter and resource center – is just weeks away from opening its doors. The center will finally open its doors at 10 a.m. on Friday, October 4. It’s a grand opening years in the making.

A Community-Wide Effort for Adequate Housing

It took the combined efforts of more than 15 agencies – with Community Services Employment Training (CSET) leading the search for ideas and funding – to come this far. Now the hard work – finding homes, jobs and aid for the unhoused – can finally begin.

Mary-Alice Escarsega-Fechner, director of CSET, described the progress made so far as a vast collaboration between many partners. First on her list when describing taking the center from a dream to a reality are TC Hope and Self Help Enterprises.

“TC Hope were the ones who got it started, and we couldn’t have gotten it started without the land Self Help donated,” she said. “We wouldn’t have been able to build the building without them.”

TC Hope for the Homeless was formed in 2020 with the specific goal of aiding the area’s homeless people primarily through construction of a low-barrier navigation center. Co-founded by Phil Hornburg and Don Hutton, the charity has attracted some notable local names to the ranks of its volunteers.

Many other notable agencies and organizations are deeply involved. The Visalia City Council approved \$5 million in zero-interest, forgivable loans and grants to fund construction in 2021. And several government agencies will have workers on-site, including TC Behavior Health. Others involved include Family Services Supporting Tulare County, Family HealthCare Network, Turning Point, Rotary Club of Visalia, Food Link Tulare County, Kaweah Health, the Source LGBT-plus Center and the Christ Lutheran Church.

The Kings/Tulare Homeless Alliance will provide staffing for the center, supplementing the CSET staff. In total, 30 to 40 employees will staff the Visalia Navigation Center. Other partners include the Visalia Homeless Center and Visalia Senior Housing, Inc.

“It is a 24-7, 365 project, which is new for us. We’ll have three shifts for the first time,” said Esparsega-Fechner. “We can’t do it without the community. Not just monetary, which is great, but it’s going to take all of us working together. It’s very complex.”

Keeping a Low Profile at the Edge of Town

The center itself is a huge construction – a single nondescript building tucked away between the shopping centers and apartment complexes on the far northern end of Court Street – 3524 North Court Street to be exact. There’s nothing gaudy about the campus. But it’s no eyesore either. From the outside it looks much like any other commercial complex, squatting tucked away behind 6-foot-tall walls and steel fences, and surrounded by drought-tolerant landscaping.

A huge parking lot opens onto Court Street. It’s intended for the staff, but has oversize spaces as well, set up for the trailers various agencies providing services to the future residents will occupy when they’re on campus.

The collegiate atmosphere continues inside. The Visalia Navigation Center looks in many ways like a typical college dorm. Past the entrance, where those who come seeking services will get the first interview, is a huge great room. The entire center is filled with similar communal spaces inside and out where residents can gather, dine, attend workshops or even watch the occasional movie.

Outside is more of the same. Outside walls made mostly of windows are wide green lawns. One will serve as an area for walking pets. A second one is simply a place to be outside. A third one is already filled with raised gardening beds.

“The dream there is growing produce and making some delicious meals in our own kitchen,” said Michaela Lara-Lopez, assistant director of the center for CSET.

The community garden is just one of the features that sets the center apart from other efforts to help those living on the city’s streets, in its parks and anywhere they can find temporary shelter. The people behind the center essentially created a single location where those struggling with housing can find a broad swath of services. It’s something unique the community – especially those who worked directly to make it happen – can be proud of.

“It’s the first comprehensive center in California, to be honest,” Escarsega-Fechner said.

Providing Basic Human Needs and a Lot More

The most important feature at the center, of course, is the common dormitories. Two huge open rooms in the north wing will be filled with beds; the one for men is about twice the size of the one for women. This, said Lara-Lopez, is in keeping with the demographics of the city’s homeless population and homeless populations in general. Rooms are also set aside for elderly homeless individuals, families and those recently discharged from hospitals with nowhere to go next.

While the center will open its doors early next month, the services will come in phases. The goal is to start by providing for the most basic of human needs: food and a safe shelter. Addressing more complex problems will come later.

“We hope to be up to 100 (residents) by winter,” said Escarsega-Fechner. “There will be a range of services to help stabilize their lives.”

Those will eventually include job training and placement, mental and physical healthcare, substance abuse counseling, and connections to permanent housing. Case managers will guide individual residents to the services best suited to their needs.

‘A Place They Want to Be’

Back to the basics, the center also provides laundry services, telephone, mail and internet connections, showers, animal kennels, personal property storage, and parking for residents’ vehicles. To make this range of services available to as many people as possible, the center makes it fairly easy to get in.

The Visalia Navigation Center will allow partners to stay together. Pets are allowed – just one dog per person to start. Those using the center won’t have to leave their belongings behind. And they’ll have privacy.

The hope is to encourage as many people as possible to seek the services already available.

“People don’t have to access any of these services, but they’re available for them,” Escarsega-Fechner said. “We want to create a place they want to be.”

Those who planned the navigation center didn’t start from scratch. They began by looking at what’s been tried so far in other communities, what works and what’s still needed.

“We really looked hard at all the best practices across the state,” Escarsega-Fechner said. “Some of the things they have are things we’re trying to do.”

In particular, they looked at 40 Prado, a low-barrier shelter in San Luis Obispo for inspiration. It too seeks to provide a wide range of on-site services for its participants.

“We learned from them what is still needed,” Escarsega-Fechner said. “I believe we’re a community that wants to bring services quickly and work well together.”

A Second Low-Barrier Shelter Coming to Tulare

There are plans to build a similar institution in Tulare, with the city talking the lead role there. The city currently operates the Tulare Cares Temporary Encampment at East Walnut Avenue and South O Street. The tent facility can house up to 178 people, and some access to services is available. Tulare City Hall estimates around 200 people live on that city's streets.

The city is in the process of planning a navigation center. The 20,000-square-foot facility will be located on three acres at the Hillman Health Center. The \$5 million cost of construction will be borne by the city, using surplus city funds, as well as federal funding. The plans so far appear very similar to the Visalia Navigation Center.

Construction proposals for the Tulare center were reviewed in January, and a committee recommendation for awarding a contract was made in February.

The city hopes to open the center one year after construction begins.

Delays Slowed Opening of Visalia Navigation Center

CSET originally hoped to open the Visalia Navigation Center in January of 2023. That, at least, was the plan back in 2021, when construction funding was first secured from the city. Delays that always go with projects like this happened, and they set their sights on opening early this year. Fate and the power company intervened.

"We were hoping to open in March or April. We were impacted by the switchgear, which is a connection to Southern California Edison," Escarsega-Fechner said. "Many projects were backlogged. We didn't get it until late June. Then we had to get together with Edison to light up the building."

The building is fully powered now. Inside, the finishing work is well underway. The commercial kitchen is filled with brand-new, unused stainless steel appliances. Hookups in the laundry room are ready to receive machines. The raised garden beds await planting. And everywhere are workers busily seeing to final details.

The only thing missing are beds and the people to fill them. They'll be there soon.

"We're about ready," Escarsega-Fechner said.

Housing, Employment and Wellness Keys to Recovery

The ultimate goal of the Visalia Navigation Center is to provide a pathway to a healthy life for its residents. That includes more than putting a roof over their heads.

"You can't talk about stabilizing people's lives until you talk about housing and employment," Escarsega-Fechner said. "And then there's wellness."

Besides, there's a six-month limit on stays at the center. It's not a hard rule. Exceptions can be made in certain cases. The goal, however, is for the navigation center to serve as a safe but ultimately temporary place for people to get off the street and become healthy. They're hoping to lead clients to better things, especially dignity and self-respect.

It's what the homeless really want, Escarsega-Fechner said.

“We have been doing programs that serve and support individuals who have unfortunately experienced homelessness for a while,” she said. “They want to be seen as human beings.”

But that’s not where the center’s staff will start with new arrivals.

“Our goal is to provide for everybody what they need immediately,” Escarsega-Fechner said.

Later on, their clients will be offered job training and placement, given access to long-term housing and, most importantly, various forms of counseling to address the root issues that put them on the streets.

Some residents will train in the center’s commercial kitchen, doing paid work to provide meals for CSET’s Meals on Wheels program for seniors. Others may find work on one of several CalTrans sponsored work crews for up to eight months. So far, 10 CSET placed in the program have found permanent jobs with the state’s road construction and maintenance agency.

“The intention is to get these people into the workforce,” said Escarsega-Fechner. “We’d be paying residents for their work and putting them on a potential pathway. Hopefully, we’ll get them to other opportunities.”

Those at the shelter will also be able to attend religious services, join meetings of Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous, and participate in other similar self-help programs. The range of programs will no doubt grow as the center continues to evolve.

Helping guide those changes will be the center’s Advisory Neighborhood Council. Lara-Lopez said those living in the area immediately surrounding the center responded well to an invitation to participate. The advisory council – which will provide feedback from the neighborhood – is just one opportunity for volunteerism at the Visalia Navigation Center. Those who wish to join the effort can contact CSET at www.cset.org/vnc or call (559) 732-4194.